

## **Building a Learning Community through Curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

This paper uses mixed methods to document how a new charter school's curriculum facilitates in the development of a learning community. The study highlights diverse curricular practices that often do not take place in traditional public schools. The school's philosophy and curriculum, which is based in social justice, provides a unique environment where students have the opportunity to better understand the world around them while simultaneously building relationships with their classmates and teachers. Utilizing a methodological combination of observations, informal and formal interviews, document analysis, and a short survey, the paper provides a rich description of the implementation of a charter school's curriculum steeped in critical pedagogy.

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## **Introduction**

Establishing relationships that develop into a close-knit learning community can prove to be advantageous for students' learning. It is through students' relationships with administrators, teachers and classmates that they are able to learn most effectively. This study looks at these relationships and more specifically at how a new charter school's curriculum has led to the building of an in-school learning community.

As a result of the United States Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), public schools are under constant pressure to improve students' test scores, often at the expense of social and affective aspects of education (Goodman, Shannon, Goodman & Rapoport, 2006). Some parents have tried to move away from their local public school's emphasis on testing by sending their children to charter schools. In the U.S., charter schools are hybrid forms of public and private schools that started to open in the early 1990s, allowing the private sector to more actively engage in public school education. While charter school funding and laws differ by state, in general charter schools are public in that they are open to any child of school age, but are private in that the school is responsible for covering costs above state expenditures. As a result, charter schools are often linked to businesses that financially allow for their survival. One of the benefits of the charter school movement has been that schools can take alternative approaches to covering the material required by state standards (Abowitz, 2001). While all charter schools are still accountable to state standardized tests, the way in which charter schools decide to prepare their students for these tests can vary greatly.

Because the crux of this study deals with the building of community it is necessary to define what I mean by a learning community. Within this paper I use two different aspects of community that are not mutually exclusive. The first aspect is the in-school community, comprised of interactions, events and relationships between those associated with the school. The second type differs in that it is concerned with the broader surrounding community. This paper concentrates on different aspects of how the curriculum facilitates the creation of an in-school community that will ideally develop into a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This case study incorporates one full academic year's worth of observations (approximately 80 hours), informal and formal interviews with students, document analysis as well as interviews with teachers and a student survey in order to examine how the school's curriculum strategically played a role in the development of an in-school community. The principle research question is: How does this new charter school use a curriculum based in critical pedagogy to foster a learning community?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research was conducted within a theoretical framework based in critical pedagogy. Freire (1993) has played a key role in my ideas of community building and the importance of a critical approach to education. In addition, this research is grounded in a sociocultural perspective that has emerged from the "funds of

knowledge” work of Moll and Gonzalez (2004). I view this school as a social space in which all aspects of the school community play an active role in its own success. My view of creating a learning community is not based on students’ ability to regurgitate facts or perform well on standardized tests. Instead, this framework requires students to be active participants in their own learning, as well as both problem-posers and problem-solvers (Freire, 1993). Moreover, I realize the importance of community, dialogue and the incorporation of social justice into a school’s curriculum, which ideally creates conditions for long-term constructive learning. Similarly, Freire and Macedo (1995) stress the importance of providing a place for students to actively take part in their own learning while simultaneously implementing aspects of social justice to prompt critical thinking.

The majority of the documentation of curricula based in critical pedagogy comes from adult classes where teachers and students have more curricular freedom. As Shor and Freire (1987) document, the implementation of critical pedagogy can be a difficult task even when working at the postsecondary level, which is obviously compounded when attempting to work at the middle school level where there are more curricular constraints, as is the case in this study. Gutiérrez (2007) discusses pedagogies of empowerment where teachers provide adolescents with experiences that encourage them to find their own voice and question dominant power relations. This perspective necessitates that teachers avoid the practice of “banking education” (Freire, 1993). Provided teachers buy into their role as facilitator, it is necessary for the administration to support a curriculum that allows for the creation and maintenance of relationships between teachers and students as well as activities that promote critical thinking. Unfortunately, NCLB’s emphasis on high stakes tests has severely limited this possibility in the U.S. (Goodman et al., 2006).

In addition to critical pedagogy, this paper uses a sociocultural perspective premised by the “funds of knowledge” work of Moll and Gonzalez (2004). By viewing students’ diverse cultural backgrounds as additive and beneficial, teachers are able to use the funds of knowledge that students bring into the classroom to help in their own learning. This theory for teaching and learning highlights the importance of making activities and lessons socially and culturally relevant to the diverse socio-cultural experience students bring to the classroom (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004; Eryaman, 2007). Similarly, as Gutiérrez (2002) suggests, culture cannot be studied in isolation, thus I have chosen to analyze the school’s culture and community through a variety of activities that have been built into the curriculum, both in and out of school.

While observing classes, fieldtrips, meetings, and other non-traditional aspects of the school’s curriculum at Paul Francona Middle School (PFMS), I used a lens rooted in critical pedagogy and socio-cultural theory. The use of these theories guides both this work and the work of the school itself. I thought it was important that I view the school within the same, or similar, theoretical framework in attempt to understand the base on which the founders had structured the school. While I could have approached the study using counter lenses, I felt that using the same theoretical framework that the school was founded in would allow me to better understand the daily intricacies of the school.

## **Review of Literature**

There is an extensive body of literature on the development and implementation of Charter Schools in the United States (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995; DeSchryver, 1999; Gifford, Phillips & Ogle, 2000; Gresham, Hess, Maranto and Milliman, 2000; Hadderman, 2002). Since the early 1990s charter schools have increased in their popularity and even more so in the No Child Left Behind era (Holland, 2006). The justification for charter schools has been to give students an opportunity to attend a public school that will better prepare them for their future and as a means for motivating traditional public schools to improve their services. McCullough (2006) compared the charter school movement to that of the privatized mail movement in that for many years the U.S. Postal Service could do whatever it wanted because there was no competition. However, companies like Federal Express (Fed Ex) and United Postal Service (UPS) now have forced the U.S. Postal Service to become more effective. This increase in competition that charter schools can offer public schools is why McCullough believes charter schools can be effective in overall school reform.

Despite the quantity of literature on charter schools, there is little attention given to charter schools whose focus is in critical pedagogy and social justice or more broadly concerning the range of different curricula used in these schools. Albowitz (2001) reports that nationwide there has been an increased popularity for specialized charter schools and these schools vary in emphasis from conventional foci like mathematics and science to more progressive themes like Afrocentrism and, in this case, social justice. However, because of the relatively short amount of time that these schools have been in operation, few, if any, studies have considered their effectiveness.

Similar to the gap in social justice themed charter schools, there is a void in literature concerning community building within entire schools. The community that I am referring to throughout this paper is an in-school community, which differs subtly from other definitions of community. For instance, Cummins, Chow and Schecter (2006) argue for the incorporation of a school's surrounding community in curricular development. While I agree that a curriculum should bring in the local community, the aspect of community addressed in this research is specific to the development of in-school community through the curriculum and not necessarily the surrounding community.

There are few empirical studies documenting school community building and how a school goes about developing such a community. Empirical studies of the use of participant action research such as Cammarota and Scott (2006) document students' empowerment and highlight the link between students and the community, but this too is not necessarily the crux of my focus. There is a great need for empirical research and the documentation of particular methods of critical pedagogy in classrooms (Bigelow, 1990). Hence, this study hopes to add to the small corpus of literature highlighting how school curricula can play a role in the development of in-school community.

At a more specialized level, there is a plethora of literature on the use of how a particular class' curricula promotes community building through inquiry. Short and

Burke (2001) document the positive effects of an inquiry-based curriculum in which "... readers explore different perspectives and actually think together, not just cooperatively work together. Everyone, including the teacher, participates by listening carefully to other and working together towards understanding" (p. 24). While an inquiry based classroom curriculum as outlined in Short and Burke (2001) undoubtedly promotes community building, this paper focuses not on the curriculum of a specific classroom, but on the school wide PFMS curriculum.

The way in which learning communities are developed have been elaborated and described in different places. Edelsky, Draper and Smith (1983) describe how one particular teacher used a whole language, holistic ideology to frame her class and successfully 'hook' her students in and develop a powerful classroom community. Christensen (2000) explains how time consuming and difficult the building of community can be and defines it to mean "[students] taking into account the needs of the members of that community" (p. 5). Short (1990) is more specific than most in that she outlined six ways in which a community of learners is created:

- (1) come to know each other; (2) value what each has to offer; (3) focus on problem solving and inquiry; (4) share responsibility and control; (5) learn through action, reflection and demonstration; and (6) establish a learning atmosphere that is predictable and yet full of real choices. p. 35

For the purposes of this paper, I have decided to keep these six criteria in mind as well as use Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of a community of practice. A community of practice is built on the idea that people with shared experiences, languages and histories come together and form a community where the actions represent their common history. While communities of practice take time to develop and evolve, and this is only the first year of the school, the 'practice' aspect of the community is still in its developmental stages. Nevertheless, it is the goal of the directors to allow the school community to live through similar in-school experiences culminating in what would be an example of a community of practice.

### **Research Context**

The PFMS opened in August of 2005, with capacity for sixty students for grades six and seven<sup>1</sup>. Common to most new charter schools, initial enrollment was significantly lower than the directors had expected. The school is located in the basement of a historic building, within walking distance of a large research university in the southwestern part of the United States. The school is run by co-directors, Santini and Jennifer (all names are pseudonyms), who have spent the better part of their working lives as teachers and teacher trainers in urban education reform throughout the United States. The school was funded on 501C3 money as a non-profit organization, in addition the school received a federal grant for computers, providing every student with access to modern technology. The school was also linked to the Turning Points Organization, which is an organization committed to

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<sup>1</sup> The original charter was set for 90 students for three grades, an eighth grade which was added in the second year was planned to have 30 more students putting the school at 90 total pupils. In the second year of the school the charter was changed to have only 75 total students or 25 students per grade.

middle school reform that focuses on creating students who are active in their surrounding community and who are “engaged in planning and managing their own learning” (Turning Points, 2005).

My first visit to the school came two weeks after its opening for the fall trimester of 2005-2006, when there were only twenty-three students enrolled. Before opening, the directors were expecting around sixty students. The lack of students meant a major economic burden as well as added pressure to recruit more students in addition to the daily tasks of running a new school. As the school year progressed, more and more students joined the school. By the end of the year there were fifty-two students, of which the majority planned to return the subsequent year.

Upon arrival, I was pleasantly surprised at the diversity of the school. Even with such a small student enrollment, the directors were able to attract students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds as well as a number of minority groups. For example, of the thirty-two students, eleven were minorities (Field notes 11/16/05). Furthermore, as was evidenced on a carpooling map of the city, students literally came from all parts of the city, ranging from the wealthy to the poor neighborhoods, and from down the street to a thirty-minute commute. The school’s staff was comprised of a bilingual secretary/Spanish teacher, math teacher, science teacher, a humanities teacher and his student teacher, and the co-directors. With the exception of the Hispanic secretary, the school’s staff was Anglo. The school also contracted an independent art teacher and made an agreement with the dance studio located above the school to offer a variety of physical education and dance electives throughout the year.

The school has a friendly aura about it, which stems from its mission of accepting others’ cultures, appearance, languages and differences. This was articulated by Pickles<sup>2</sup>, a seventh grade male who, when asked about the community building in the school, responded:

“[S]ince the school is about being a community, it sort of changes people’s thought about being a community... saying that it is about community makes people want it to be more about community... [S]o when people come, we talk about incorporating them in, [so] you just make friends faster.”

Visitors are routinely welcomed with handshakes, hi-fives, and smiles from many of the students. Throughout the first year students would come up to me, jump on my shoulders, put out their hands for hi fives and nod their head to say hello. Equally as important was when parents or university students would come by for tutoring or observations, and many students would introduce themselves or just say hi (Field notes 10/18/05). Similar to the students’ inviting attitudes towards outsiders, new students joining the school mid-year were able to make friends and adapt to the other students in a rather quick and effortless manner (interviews with Octavio, Willow, and Pickles). Similarly, parents have mentioned to me on numerous occasions how they were happy that their child was accepted so quickly.

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<sup>2</sup> Students were allowed to pick their own pseudonyms

## Methodology

This study used mixed methods that employed five different forms of data collection. Observations and informal and formal audio-taped interviews were the key components of the data collection and document analysis. I also distributed a student questionnaire to compliment and triangulate findings from the observations and interviews (Merriam, 2001). The first, and most time-consuming, aspect of the data collection was the on-site observations. Through my onsite visits to the school I was able to observe and participate in all aspects of the school including, classes, meetings, activities and fieldtrips. I observed classes for both sixth and seventh graders, as well as attended additional parts of the school day like morning reflections with the entire school community, staff meetings, yoga, dance, and fieldtrips. I observed all aspects at least once and attended the majority of curricular activities on multiple occasions.

The second form of data collection was informal interviews with students, teachers, and administrators. These informal interviews provided insight that the observations alone would not have been able to speak to, such as the struggle between the teachers and directors to find ways to develop rules while simultaneously supporting student empowerment. These short interviews came in informal settings such as walks to a protest on immigration, or in talking to students or teachers during lunchtime, Kiva, or at recess. The majority of these informal interviews were at times when it would have been awkward to tape record; hence I elected to take careful notes as soon after the event as possible.

Formal taped interviews were the third form of data collection. Interviews were conducted with the directors as well as all of the teachers within the first academic year and interviews with the students took place in the second academic year. Interviews with the directors and teachers were approximately an hour in length and interviews with students were twenty minutes long. The interview format was based on Spradley's (1979) criteria for conducting an ethnographic interview in which the interviewer elicits thick descriptions related to themes and concepts that emerged from previous data. Thus, all of the interviews were conducted in and around the use of social justice and the curriculum and how the directors and teachers promote the building of community within the school. While serving to triangulate my observations, the interviews also provided excellent examples of events and relationships that I was not able to witness as the researcher.

The fourth form of data collection came from the document analysis of the school's web page and weekly updates to the school community called the *Friday Footnote*. I used the school's web page to learn more about its intended philosophy and the *Friday Footnote*, a newsletter that goes home on Friday afternoons, to stay up to date on weekly events missed in the observations. It is authored by one of the directors and informs parents what students have been doing that week as well as advising them of upcoming events. The *Friday Footnotes* were used to gain an idea of the highlights of each week as well as plan observations for the following week.

The final form of data collection is an analysis of a 21-item questionnaire that was answered by thirty-three of the school's forty-three students enrolled at the time it

was distributed. This questionnaire, which was designed to be rapid and anonymous, and provided quantitative data focused primarily on the development of community as well as students' comfort level in this learning context. The questionnaire, which was piloted with five students prior to its distribution to the whole school, provided data that was then compared to the other data sources in order to confirm and disconfirm initial findings. This mixed methods research uses triangulation in order to add validity and ensure that what is being documented is akin to the beliefs and viewpoints of the directors, teachers, and students (Merriam, 2001).

In order to make this research as participatory as possible, I did not isolate myself from the students, teachers or directors. Instead I participated whenever possible and took an active role in my research. My participation in the school often allowed me the opportunity to substitute teach, chaperone school functions, and regularly help as a driver on fieldtrips. To ensure that I was welcomed and not seen as an outsider, I made frequent visits to the site even if it was for a short amount of time. This allowed the students to recognize my face and identify me, to some extent, as part of the school.

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study encompassed all of the main players in the school. The co-directors, Math, Science, and Humanities teachers, and almost all of the students participated in the research. The overall student population was diverse in that students came from all geographic parts of the city as well as all different socio-economic statuses. Furthermore, the student body was racially diverse with two-thirds being Caucasian and the other third comprised of Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans. All of the teachers and directors were middle class whites with varying degrees of experience teaching. The co-directors and science teacher all had over twenty years of experience in teaching and/or school administration, the Humanities teacher had taught at the middle school level for eight years and the Math teacher had taught English in Japan for a year, but had never taught Math before. While the teachers varied in experience, they all had a common goal, which was using critical pedagogy and working together to create a learning community where students would be able to build on their talents and interests. The faculty worked as a team at the school and their communication and togetherness was infectious as the students mimicked the togetherness of the teachers.

### **Data Analysis**

Using the school's goal of building community through their curriculum was the main theme throughout the data analysis. From the beginning I was curious to see what the directors and teacher were going to do in order to build the school's community. Thus my data analysis focused on identifying events throughout my field notes and interviews that would highlight specific aspects of the curriculum that the directors, teachers, and students believed to be the most effective in creating this new learning community. Detailed field notes from the observations, which also incorporated informal interviews, comprised the bulk of the data. A survey of the students using a Likert scale was also used to assess what particular aspects of the curriculum the students thought were the most effective in community building process. The results from the survey was evidence that there were three general



aspects of the curriculum that most facilitated in the community building process. The data was then coded based on specific events that the students, teachers and directors or myself identified as a potential meaningful event for the schools' growth. For instance, an event in the humanities class using a provocative reading or assignment was coded in my field notes and any mention of a similar task was coded the same. The main divisions of the coding were split into the three aspects of the curriculum, which each ended with a variety of sub-groups.

After the questionnaire, and as the data analysis progressed, it was obvious that the primary community building process happened in different ways based on the three general aspects of the school's curriculum. The three areas were: *Activities inside the school* (not core classes), *Core classes*, and *Activities outside the school*. Unlike many traditional schools PFMS has a variety of non-academic aspects of the day that have been instituted to build a strong school community. Kiva (a fifteen-minute daily reflection/community building activity), weekly school assemblies, advisory and electives are all examples of aspects of the students' daily/weekly schedule that have been coded as *Activities inside the school*. According to the school directors, *Core classes* were comprised of Humanities, Science, Mathematics and Spanish. However, Spanish was not given the same amount of weight as the other three core courses and it was the only class taught without a certified teacher. *Activities outside the school* pertain to fieldtrips, intersession trips and other activities that happened off campus. These three areas comprise the manner in which the data was broken down and analyzed. Each area will be elaborated on in the subsequent sections of the paper.

## Findings

### *Activities inside the school*

The daily curriculum at the PFMS is set up in a rather non-traditional manner. From Monday through Thursday the day starts with a fifteen minute Kiva session and on Friday there is a fifty-five minute school assembly. The purpose of Kiva and weekly assemblies is to provide a space where students, teachers and even parents can come together as a community before academic classes start. In addition, this is the time where students were able to voice proposals for aspects/projects of the school that they would like to add or improve. For instance, within the first month of class, three sixth graders brought forth a proposal to move lunch from after to before their third class because many of the students were so hungry in their third class that they could not concentrate (Field notes 09/7/06). Other proposals took the form of organizing a school dance as well as voting on a student of the week. Unlike schools that I attended growing up, and many I have observed, student-initiated proposals at PFMS were constantly encouraged by teachers and directors and were put to a vote by the student body (Field notes 9/16/2006). In fact, the three student-initiated proposals mentioned above were voted on, passed, and enacted by the students. These experiences, which are built into the curriculum, worked to build a cohesive unit among students to think together, simultaneously strengthening their bond. Furthermore allowing student to propose change is teaching them to be agents of change and is itself an empowering aspect of the curriculum.

Starting each day with Kiva was a relaxing, fun way for students to engage in dialogue as well as become active in their own learning. Kiva was also frequently attended by many of the students' parents who play a vital role in the school by organizing fieldtrips and/or using their expertise to teach extracurriculars. Kiva gatherings created a place where students are respected and listened to by all in attendance. The school's emphasis on the democratic process required all votes be passed unanimously. Initially, getting all students to decide unanimously was a difficult venture. However, as the students gained experience they were able to pick their battles, and concessions were generally made between students in order to pass various proposals, as was the case in the moving of the lunch hour. In addition to Kiva, other aspects outside of the core classes were advisory and electives.

Advisory took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays for fifty-five minutes each day. The school was broken up into four different advisories with fewer than fourteen students in each group by the end of the year. Advisories were mixed by grade level and served multiple functions. Many of the activities in advisory were related to community building where students spoke about their problems, their personal histories, as well as things that they are enjoying or disliking about the school and/or society. The Math teacher explained her feelings about advisory when she said, "I like to teach things besides Math. I look at myself as a whole person with many different facets and one of them being Math, but letting them show all of their different sides and embrace all of their different qualities, physically, mentally, spiritually... [allowed her to] be more like a role model or mentor." Advisories often went to the park to play or to read books collectively and then discuss them. By the end of the year each advisory had invested a lot of time together and were close-knit groups where students felt comfortable in sharing the most personal experiences such as a parent's drug addiction and another parent's drug overdose and death. Advisory provides a unique venue in which students are able to get to know one of their teachers and other students in an intimate venue where everyone feels comfortable sharing in diverse activities.

Throughout the first year the students had a variety of electives that they participated in as a school. In the first trimester the school was initially so small (only 23 students) that all students participated in African Drumming, where a local drum teacher would come with a drum for each student. Students sat in a large circle and practiced in unison. Twenty-five plus drums beating to the same beat is incredible to both hear and feel. Moreover, each student realized his or her individual importance in keeping with the beat in order to continue the unique sound. The day that I participated in the African drumming was an awe-inspiring experience where I felt the strengthening of community with every beat of the drum.

Other electives that first year included modern dance/hip-hop as well as a folk music unit. The co-directors put major emphasis on not allowing electives and the arts fall prey to high stakes testing as many public schools have throughout the U.S. in the No Child Left Behind era. Furthermore it was through many of the electives that the students were able to socialize, show off their other talents and develop relationships with other classmates. While the electives were aspects of the curriculum that served to strengthen the community, the core classes offered a different side of the school's curriculum.

### *Core classes*

The four classes that the PFMS has identified as its core classes are: Humanities, Mathematics, Science, and Spanish. Spanish, however, was only taught three times a week while the others were taught daily and it is the only class whose teacher is not certified. The school's staff spent many long summer days, before the school opened, developing a curriculum and finding ways to implement critical pedagogy, social justice, and environmental sustainability into all aspects of the school (Field notes 9/21/05). The classroom instruction provides students with a sound foundation in social justice that is reinforced in other school related activities.

I observed that the humanities classes for both the sixth and seventh graders heavily integrated social justice issues into daily activities. The science classes were based on experiential learning about the world around them. This class frequently went on fieldtrips or did science related activities inside the school. While various aspects of critical pedagogy were used, the classes concentrated more on environmental sustainability. The math class was the only class of the core courses that used a textbook-based curriculum. As a result, the math teacher felt in some ways obligated to cover much of the material in the series of books purchased by the school. While students had Math projects and activities that tied into social justice, i.e. word problems, bake sales etc. very little of their everyday learning was social justice oriented. Nevertheless, the math teacher did an excellent job diversifying seating arrangements, as well as using an eclectic variety of teaching techniques to help the students and get them to work together. However, through my observations of the Spanish class I found little evidence of social justice or critical pedagogy in use. With the exception of Spanish, all classes incorporated, in different ways, class discussions, meaningful field experiences, and group work, which all worked to supplement the creation and maintenance of community and thinking critically about the world around them.

The humanities class, generally team-taught by a student teacher and a certified teacher, offered the best example of implementing social justice in the school. The teachers consistently used socially provocative texts and allowed students time for reflection and discussion of the various readings. For instance in the sixth grade class, the student teacher showed a short film excerpt about the creation of the U.S. Constitution. The teacher used guiding questions like: Who were the people who wrote the constitution? Were there any people left out? Students quickly picked up on the fact that women, blacks, Hispanics and other groups were not represented among those who were responsible for the writing of the U.S. constitution. This realization was followed by a discussion among the students where one student commented, "the document was written by the rich and for their own benefit." Another student chimed in saying that "today the rich don't send their children to war. It is only the poor that do." These comments about war led way to a larger discussion about how discrimination has unfortunately played a major part in U.S. history and how it is still prevalent today (Field notes, 9/16/05). Like majority of the lessons in the humanities class, students are expected to think critically about the world around them and towards the end of the first trimester the teachers confirmed my

observations that the students were starting to expand their ways of using their mind as they started thinking outside of the box.

The absence of an assigned textbook in the humanities class allowed the teacher and his student teacher to handpick readings that they believed to be provocative, would meet the state standards, and that were interesting for the students. One such example came from a seventh grade class where the activity focused on the injustice and sexism with respect to women among the Taliban in Afghanistan. The students were read an excerpt from a provocative text titled: *My Forbidden Face* by Latifa (2002). The main purpose of the text was to show detail and the power of imagery in using the words of a middle school aged child in Afghanistan as she detailed the horrors of the Taliban and their impact on her as a young woman. Following the reading the teacher had the students reflect in writing about the brutalities discussed in the excerpt from the book. After the personal writing time, the teacher opened the class up to discussion where students made comments like “that is horrible,” “why did they do that,” “that isn’t fair,” “I wouldn’t want to live there.” The text served as a prompt for students to think about injustice around the world and the way others live. The students discussed their thoughts and opinions about the situation in Afghanistan and the way that women are treated in the story (Field notes, 10/6/05). Dealing with these emotional topics and allowing students to discuss, debate and dialogue about their emotions and feelings provided a space for the students to grow and grapple with sensitive topics together.

In my observations of the math and science classes I did not find as many examples of the incorporation of social justice, however the theme of social justice was present. The activities involving social justice often took place outside of the classroom on class-sponsored field trips and thus were not as evident in the classroom. For instance, the math class organized a bake sale to raise money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. They used the activity to learn basic accounting skills and engaged in many mathematical activities in the implementation of the fundraiser.

Another example of social justice and community building came in a math class where students used their knowledge of percentages in an activity highlighting the distribution of wealth in the United States. Ten students were assigned to go to the front of the room and sit down in one of the ten chairs. She then explained to the students that if the money in the U.S. were distributed evenly each person would have \$250,000 and each student would be entitled to one chair. However, the teacher then asked the students who wanted to be rich? All of the students raised their hand and finally the teacher chose one of the students and told her that she could lay over seven of the chairs. The other nine students were then assigned to share the remaining three chairs. The teacher then said that this was a more accurate view of the distribution of wealth in the U.S. where ten percent of the population has seventy percent of the wealth. The seven students who had to share the three chairs were visibly frustrated that they were not entitled to a chair and this frustration then moved the class into a discussion. The discussion elicited a number of comments from students such as “rich people are on the north side” referring to the way that the city is noticeably divided between the rich and the poor. Another student said, “that is why people steal” referring to the injustice and major discrepancies in the distribution of wealth in the United States. As the discussion progressed the teacher started to probe students’ ideas of what it takes to make money and be rich. Questions such as: what does one

have to do to make a lot of money? If you work hard your whole life does that mean that you will be wealthy? At this point one student named Octavio, spoke about his uncle and how he was a truck driver who drove all over the country for long hours and worked extremely hard, but was not rich. Other students spoke about their parents or people that they know who have similar stories. The discussion and unpacking of the lesson on the distribution of wealth in the U.S. dispelled many commonly held ideas that one only has to work hard and stay in school to be rich in American society. Many of the students were just starting to understand that there is an element of privilege that is part of the American dream, which was often omitted from their instruction in previous schools (Field notes 10/13/05).

In line with Dewey (1938) the science teacher believed strongly in the importance of meaningful experiences in and outside of the science classroom. The teacher regularly took the students out into the community to identify different living organisms in their every day environments both at home and on their commute to school. Although the in-class work was not always directly related to social justice, both the math and science teachers actively engaged their students with experiences in the community that built on their funds of knowledge and thus facilitated their learning (Moll & González, 2004).

Sixth and seventh graders at the PFMS were in many respects provided a space for their own empowerment by their teachers and more generally in the organization of the curriculum. This was achieved by encouraging, students to guide activities, speak-out, honoring their opinions when they did speak and praising them for doing so. Likewise, the teachers encouraged students to think about their own society and took them on field trips, multiple times a month, exposing them to the community around them.

### ***Activities outside the school***

PFMS takes great pride in its involvement in the community and teachers have used the surrounding area as a venue to aid in their community building. Building on much of Dewey (1938), the focus was on the importance of learning through experiences, and so the Humanities, Math and Science classes regularly left the school grounds to engage in authentic meaningful learning throughout the surrounding city. Located within walking distance of a major university, the school takes advantage of the many resources and events that the university has to offer. The math class sponsored a fundraiser that took place on the university grounds where students sold baked goods to raise money for Hurricane Katrina victims (Field notes, 10/6/05). The humanities class often attended different events on campus such as listening to the governor's speech and attending a poetry reading. Science classes offered students the opportunity to go out into the community and identify different plants and organisms that are found in the students' immediate surroundings. Fieldtrips are an integral part of the curriculum and students and teachers are often within walking distance of the school on different assignments that create a link between what is learned in the classroom and the realities of every day life.

The 2005 – 2006 academic year was one where a great number of policies and trials concerning immigration were discussed in the media and played out in the courts. Students participated in marches that were pro-immigration and some

students even attended a trial of two people arrested for providing humanitarian aid to undocumented aliens trying to cross the US border. A particular excerpt taken from my field notes from a field trip to a pro immigration rally with some of the students, describes the effect that the school has had on the students. While we were all at the rally a reporter came up to a few of the students and started asking difficult questions about the immigration protests such as why are you here? Do you know what they are marching for?

The questions were answered by a number of the students and their answers were not only articulate, they were educated and well informed... When the reporter asked would vote if they were old enough, all of the students looked at the interviewer as if it was a stupid question and responded, 'why wouldn't I vote? It is our responsibility.' One of the students in particular talked about the importance of human rights and how she was protesting because 'our government does many things to take those rights away from immigrants and no human is illegal.' Another on looking protestor looked at me as I was listening in on the verbal exchange between the interviewer and the student and said 'that girl has got it!' (Field notes 3/31/06)

The school's ability to allow and provide these experiences to the students was extremely important, but equally as important was the debriefing and the discussions that occurred after each activity. Throughout their core courses, as well as in Kiva and assembly, students would deconstruct and analyze their powerful experiences. Controversial topics such as immigration, racism, and issues of inequity necessitate a close community in order for everyone's voice to be heard. Moreover, the dialogue around difficult topics facilitates in the building and strengthening of community. These discussions were often the first step in the creation of inquiry projects where the students did research on or a project about their interests such as children soldiers, homelessness, genocide in Darfur among others.

Between each trimester students engaged in a weeklong intersession where they selected an activity that they were interested in and worked with their classmates and a teacher on that specific activity. The first intersession divided the students into three different groups. The first group sent fourteen students to Mexico where they undertook scientific experiments and attempted to use their Spanish. The second group, called "Show Time" was comprised of eleven students who attended a number of plays throughout the week and then performed personal monologues. The third group consisted of five students who studied homelessness. The homelessness project gave students the opportunity to talk to and help the homeless in various shelters, parks, and feeding sites (Field notes 11/18/05). Moreover, the majority of those interviewed, as well as the questionnaire data, pointed to the intersession experiences as being some of the most beneficial aspects of the curriculum in terms of community building.

An excerpt from the final reflection papers of one of the students from the group the studied homelessness provides excellent insight as to how powerful the intersession experience was for many of the students.

"...Everyone was sitting there taking notes on the stories this man would tell us. I couldn't. I was completely unable to even look away from his face. His

stories were so unbelievable and sometimes hard to hear. He told us all that if we spent just one day out on the street with him looking as if we were homeless, we would be so grateful of what we have and that we weren't homeless" (Willow, Homelessness Observations and Conversations).

The second intersession had a wider range of groups. One group went on a camping trip, another on a three-day trip where the theme was 'pushing your limits.' Others stayed behind at the school and learned about how to repair and build bicycles as well as bicycle safety. From the questionnaire as well as the interviews with the directors, teachers and students, intersession was consistently the aspect of the curriculum where the majority identified community building at work. Long car rides and over-night trips along with a generally fun experience provided ample time for students to be themselves and bond with their peers. Engaging in the non-traditional curriculum provided new experiences, allowing the students to grow together, which with time could potentially develop into a community of practice. Apart from having fun activities, the directors and teachers consciously created intersession groups based on students' behavior and interests, but also worked to break up existing cliques and force particular students to open themselves up to others. At the end of intersession each particular group had gotten to know one another in a unique fun manner.

All of the activities that were carried out throughout the intersession had components that took the students out of school and into the real world. Students in this school are exposed to life outside of school, where learning does not occur in a vacuum but is authentic and personal. By allowing the students to choose which specific activity they wanted to participate in, the school followed its goal of allowing students to develop their own interests and take an active role in their own learning.

## **Discussion**

Throughout approximately eighty hours of onsite observations, coupled with interviews and questionnaire data, it became obvious to me that the PFMS has succeeded in its goal of creating a learning community through a curriculum based in social justice. Directors, teachers, and students alike learned and worked together to improve themselves and their understandings of the world and immediate community. Whether the activities took place in Kiva, advisory, assembly, inside the classroom, on a fieldtrip or during intersession, students and teachers were constantly engaged in activities that make them feel as though they play an integral role in their school and surrounding community. The students have learned the importance of community through a variety of experiences. The teachers and parents lead by example through actively participating in daily school activities and promoting their children's education by enrolling them in this non-traditional school.

Within the normal week there are a total of nine hours and forty-five minutes dedicated to non-core courses. In this time students partake in an eclectic variety of community building activities. Kiva, assembly, electives, learning lab, which all are components of in-school activities, offer students a wide range of venues to show their talents, share with their peers and discuss larger overarching issues that face them as teenagers in a complex society. A traditional curriculum generally does not afford for all of this 'experimental' time. It is through this curriculum that teachers

have the opportunity to promote social justice and use critical pedagogy in their classrooms. The curriculum based in community building has facilitated in the creation of what Anyon (1980) would call an executive elite school.

Anyon (1980) documented how different socio-economic levels elicited vastly different ways of teaching in five different schools where the instruction methods reinforced the type of learning and work associated with the students' socio-economic status. Anyon demarcated the difference in educational methods used in working-class schools versus those used in executive-elite schools, where the working class schools concentrated on rote memory and regurgitation of facts and the executive-elite schools highlighted the importance of work individually as well as collectively with authentic learning experiences. While the PFMS has a mixture of students and would have probably fit into one of the middle class schools, the majority of the core curriculum of the school exemplifies what Anyon described as executive-elite or a curriculum that caters to the skills needed in high paying positions, such as working with others, critical thinking skills and the ability to work independently. It is through this kind of progressive attitude towards learning that students can work towards the reconstruction instead of merely reproduction which is generally perpetuated in schools (Hyslop-Margison & Richardson, 2005).

The inquiry-based curriculum allows students to choose specific things that they want to learn in-depth and teachers serve as facilitators in allowing the students to build on their inquiry (Short & Burke, 2001). The core curriculum, Kiva, electives and learning laboratory provide a space in which such inquiry promoted and incorporated, resulting in dialogue as well as experiences allowing students to grow together and see themselves in others shoes (Christensen, 2000). These experiences serve a multitude of purposes of which two of the most important are making students feel comfortable in their learning environment and the development of the beginning stages of a community of practice. The curriculum and the actions of the teachers both implicitly and directly aid in the community building process as Octavio suggested in his interview when he said "Here it is not like there are people's own cliques... Teachers are a lot more personal with their students [then his experience in other schools]... there aren't very many cliques, cause there are just a lot of people and we are all friends."

One of the more salient differences between the PFMS and traditional schools is the amount of time provided for learning outside the school walls. Throughout my data collection, if I did not plan ahead, I would often arrive at the school and find that majority of the students were off on a fieldtrip. The location of the school was ideal for multiple fieldtrips a week and teachers as well as students preferred to be out in their larger community, interviewing, observing and inquiring about things that they were learning in class. For the directors, students' ability to make connections from experience at school to the outside world has stood as testament to the success of the school's curriculum. The directors and teachers believe these connections will serve their students well for years to come (Ellis, 2000).

Lave and Wenger (1991) note that members participate at multiple levels in order to create a community of practice. Throughout the school year students were encouraged to take part in the creation of school rules, the planning of fieldtrips and the brainstorming of different intersessions. While data from the questionnaire as



well as the interviews suggested that intersessions were overwhelmingly the most beneficial aspect of the school in terms of community building it also provided a space where students engaged in multiple activities, showing their commitment to the school community through supporting their classmates, lending a helping hand, and planning and maintaining order. The activities and experiences that the school promoted provided the groundwork for a shared history that facilitates in the development of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

I started this paper stressing the importance of relationships in education. The PFMS has hired teachers who have bought into the importance of fostering and developing long lasting relationships between themselves and the children as well as among the students in general. Students right from the start called teachers by their first names, which automatically defuses part of the power structure that is generally at play in traditional classrooms. Teachers know their students' lives and their students know teachers' lives (Interview with Science Teacher). This has created a bond as well as an opportunity for the teachers and directors to craft groups that will work well together but simultaneously avoid already established cliques (Interview with Piggy). The interviews with students highlighted how intersession, classes and even advisories have facilitated a space and promoted the interaction and development of relationships throughout the school community.

The use of critical pedagogy in schools is not only informative but provides authentic learning where students are able to use their world knowledge and personal experiences to enhance their understanding of the world. Students in this school "are at the center of educating in a collective social expertise" (Suoranta & Moisio, 2006: 52). Instead of teaching math, humanities or science as if they only existed within the walls of the school, the teachers made it a point to make lessons authentic and full of meaning. By taking students on field trips and relating activities to familiar real life situations, teachers at PFMS have been able to successfully reach the students. It is important for all schools, regardless of their size and location, to make lessons authentic and meaningful (Freire, 1987). Often in this era of education, where high stakes testing reigns, teachers teach concepts without relating them to students' daily lives (Goodman et. al 2005). Divorcing concepts from their real world defeats the purpose of a meaningful education. By using the environment around the school and inviting students to play an active role in their own education, students are more likely to learn because they are motivated to do so.

Unfortunately in our current world of education, teachers and administrators feel threatened by high stakes testing and often do not allot time for experiences where students are able to engage in meaningful learning (Goodman et al. 2005). The PFMS has consciously decided not to teach to standardized tests, but instead engage its students in meaningful learning that corresponds to areas that will be tested. While long-range test results are obviously not available, their test scores within the first year gained the school the label of adequately performing from the state's Department of Education.

### **Conclusion**

Through reading about this unique charter school, one might question the practicality of the curriculum used at PFMS. While I agree that not everything that is done at the school can be adapted in all schools, there are some basic aspects of the

curriculum that I think could at least be attempted regardless of where the school is located. They are:

1. Teachers getting to know their students through outdoors / non-traditional activities – This might mean creating assignments that allow the class to walk together around the community or planning fieldtrips.
2. Setting aside a regular, set time, for students, teachers, directors and even parents to come together and share. At PFMS they call it Kiva and its takes place at the beginning of every day for 15 minutes.
3. Take a more critical approach towards teaching and learning. Teachers should discuss and reflect with their students the injustices in society and when possible allow their students to have some kind of meaningful experience surrounding the area of study. Making students be both problem posers and problem solvers.
4. Getting involved in the community, allowing the students to attend protests and the courthouse are activities that can generally be done and offer an excellent venue for students to do their own research and interview people.
5. To the extent that it is possible, plan overnight or extended time periods in which groups of students are together for a long period of time and are studying one particular unit or skill. This type of intense study and expanded time fosters relationships and memorable shared experiences necessary in building community.

In summation, through this mixed methods case study, I have shown that the PFMS has, at least in its first year, successfully implemented a curriculum grounded in Freiren ideals and social justice, which has resulted in the successful creation of a learning community. It was through a multitude of activities provided throughout the school's curriculum that facilitated in the school's successful implementation of all six of Short's (1990) aspects that build community. The directors' and teachers' ability to work together, as well as allowing students to aid in planning has provided a curriculum that not only meets state requirements for content, but also does so in a way that is purposeful, authentic and relates to social justice. On the last day of first intersession, the students presented what they had learned over the past week's intersession and then there was time for general questions about the school from the audience. One of the people in the audience, a visiting college student, asked what the students liked about the school. Two of the many positive replies were: "I feel like I have a place here" and "here you are allowed to be yourself" (Field notes 11/18/05). These quotes highlight the school's success in making students feel comfortable in their learning environment, which is often an aspect of education that is neglected in the NCLB era. The building of community through school-structured events; class lessons and fieldtrips has created a habitus among the students in the school that could potentially allow for the realization of purposeful learning long into the future.

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## *Miscellany*

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